

YOUR MAJESTY, THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

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The immediate occasion of the Anglican quarrel was an attempt to annul the royal marriage. So long as marriage remained a sacrament of the Church, and so long as the authority of the Church was not rejected, ecclesiastical jurisdiction at this point could not be denied. Apparently the problem of Henry VIII was not as much passion as succession, although it is difficult to judge the influence of these two factors on his historical decision. He fell in love with Anne Boleyn, a lady of the Court who possessed not only considerable personal charm but a number of intriguing ambitious relatives. On the other hand, Catherine, his wife, was ageing before her time; she was forty, but too bleak to content the bounding energy of the King, who was seven years younger. He could have satisfied his physical desires with a mistress; in fact, he had already had an illegitimate son and had been living with Anne Boleyn for several months, to the extent of her being pregnant before marriage. But the unlawful situation would be embarrassing and of no use as far as the succession was concerned. For it was a very religious age, and nobody was so devout as the King or so punctilious in the performance of his religious duties. Having a mistress was not exactly a religious duty; but his conscience was elastic enough, his power of self-justification was superb and could easily be found to support his own interest even when pretending to observe a religious commandment. Divorce in the proper sense of the term was inadmissible, and so was an illegitimate son as heir to the throne.

Five of Catherine's children had arrived stillborn or had died within a few months. The only survivor was princess Mary, and, therefore, the only legitimate heiress, as it was becoming obvious that the chances of a male heir were very slight in the circumstances.

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Princess Mary was regarded as no solution by an England whose only previous queen had occasioned wars of succession among other calamities. Henry was in love with Anne, and the new marriage could be the solution of all the anxieties about the succession. As divorce was unthinkable, the only way left was a papal indult declaring the previous marriage null and void, and Henry would be at liberty to marry Anne and, hopefully, give an heir to England.

We should always bear in mind that, in a religious society, where there is no independent law regulating marriage as a civil institution, every marriage falls under ecclesiastical laws, and, therefore, there is an essential distinction to be made between divorce and annulment. The former presupposes the existence of a real bond, which is now broken, and this procedure is strictly forbidden by virtue of its indissoluble property. The latter declares that, because of the presence of a serious impediment (and there are different kinds of impediments), the bond never existed, and, therefore, there is no such a thing as husband and wife, but two single people who may get married to the one they choose. It was a question of discovering an impediment that invalidated the marriage from the outset. And that is where the whole process started.

Catherine had previously been the wife of Henry's elder brother Arthur, who had died in 1502. Henry would not, in the normal course of events, have been allowed to marry his deceased brother's wife, as there was the so called impediment of "affinity", which runs parallel to that of "consanguinity", embodying thus all those who have been married to brothers or sisters and relatives within the prohibited degrees. On such a union, the book of Leviticus pronounces a curse: "if a man shall take his brother's wife it is an unclean thing: he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless".¹ The impediment had been recognized at the time of the union of Henry and Catherine, as it was, and it is, contemplated in the Canon Law, but a papal dispensation was secured to cover the impediment. It was Pope Julius II who was persuaded to grant a special dispensation.

Then disaster succeeded disaster, and the king was not the only one who began to wonder whether the whole thing had been a mistake. And

¹ Lev. 20, 21.

there arose two main question marks: Had the Pope any power to override the laws of God? Had not the sequel of heirlessness demonstrated that the Pope had overstepped himself in setting aside the curse of God? In any case, the way out could be this: Let the present Pope, Clement VII, reverse his predecessor by setting aside the dispensation and declaring the marriage invalid from the outset. In normal circumstances this could have been done. Nullity decrees for distinguished and powerful people were often granted by the Pope, and Henry, apart from being distinguished and powerful, had a strong case. But two major difficulties presented themselves: a Pope could not declare that the act of a predecessor was invalid without thereby enfeebling his own authority; and the armies of the Emperor Charles V, who was nephew to Catherine of Aragón, sacked Rome (1527) and captured the Pope; obviously, Clement VII could not gratify Henry VIII by offending Charles V.¹

Henry set to work by a series of calculated tactics. He knew that he would not meet with any serious popular opposition as long as he toppled merely the papal tiara and not the established dogma, for the England of that day was marked by a coincidence of personal piety and anti-clericalism; there were no heretical tendencies, but resentment against clericalism and papalism.

Henry, himself, had helped to create that popular opinion by loading Thomas Wolsey with preferment. Wolsey became rapidly Lord Chancellor, Archbishop of York and a Cardinal; further more, he was created “legatus a latere”, in order that he might override the whole bench of English bishops. The immense power of Wolsey had two main effects, which were both lessons not lost in the mind of the king: it showed how the control of the State and the Church in a country could be in the hands of one man, and also it fostered anti-papalism and anti-clericalism. But on the grounds of doctrine, the king, as well as Wolsey were very much for Rome and against Lutheran teachings, which were coming across the North Sea from Germany and were being discussed at Cambridge. This firm stand earned for him the title of “Defender of the Faith”, which the English sovereign still bears.²

¹ Moorman, J. R. H. (1980): *A History of the Church of England*. A. and C. Black, London, 1980: 164, 165. Also: Chadwick, O. (1986): *The Reformation*. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1986: 99.

² Moorman, J. R. H., op. cit., pp. 162, 163.

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Henry understood the discipline of the Church was much another thing, and so he ordered Wolsey to make arrangements for the annulment of his marriage. The Pope played for time; he commissioned Cardinals Wolsey and Campeggio to try the case and ordered them to go as slowly as possible. Time might cast light on the matter: political fortunes might change, Henry might tire of Anne, even a bigamy might be thinkable. Campeggio proposed to Catherine that she should take the veil, but she refused to, (vows set husband or wife free to get married again), and the proposal still worsened the matter as Catherine declared then that her marriage with Arthur had never been consummated and that, therefore, no impediment would ever have existed provided that “*dispensatio super ratum et non consummatum*” had been granted.

Henry could not afford to waste his time and was now desperate. He decided to get rid of Wolsey, whom he now regarded as a block to all progress. And then he undertook to have in readiness an ecclesiastical machinery with which to supplement Rome when the foreseen breach came. The Archbishop of Canterbury was the appropriate person to serve as the primate of an English National Church. The choice fell on Thomas Cranmer, who had suggested that in the matter of the divorce, not the canon lawyers, but the universities should be invited to render judgment, and he, himself, favoured annulment. At the same time, Wolsey’s place in the king’s council was taken by Thomas Cromwell. Then several steps followed, in form of statutes, acts, or decrees, to set up the Church of England.

First of all, he started dealing with the clergy and accused them of violating the statute of “*Praemunire*”, (almost two hundred years old), which was a privilege of restriction in law upon papal intervention in the English Church; but they had administered Roman Canon Law in their Parishes and had accepted Wolsey as papal legate. They would be forgiven provided they paid a sum of money and recognized the king as the Head of the Church, special protector, supreme Lord, and, as far as the law or Christ allows, even Supreme Head. The formula “as far as the Law of Christ allows” could cover some limitation, but only for a short time.¹ Henry had done very well: he had made the clergy responsible for a kind of crime and had persuaded them to accept the Crown as an essential part of the English

¹ Chadwick, O., *op. cit.*, p. 100.

Church. He would turn now to the question of divorce by means of a series of Acts published on the matter.

The Act in Restraint of Appeals. The final appeal in ecclesiastical causes had been to Rome. This Act forbids the clergy to appeal to Rome and requires them to defy papal anathemas and to continue to administer the sacraments despite possible excommunication.

The Act of Dispensations, which transferred the power of granting dispensations and licences from the Pope to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and also abolished the ancient payment of “Peter’s Pence”.

The Act of Succession, which declared the marriage of Henry and Catherine annulled. Anne will be the king’s wife and their daughter Elisabeth heiress. A girl after all!

The Act of Supremacy, finally, declared: “the king’s majesty justly and rightly is and ought to be and shall be reputed the only Supreme Head in the earth of the Church of England called *Anglicana Ecclesia*”. (November, 1534).¹

It was done. But the breach with Rome was a constitutional change. The reformation in England was still to come. And the main pillars of the early reformation were two most outstanding books: The English Bible and The Book of Common Prayer. We are dealing, partly, with the former, as the later was published a few years later, under Edward VI.

Henry ordered that an English Bible should be installed in the churches. It is well known that the official language of the Roman Church, at that time and until recently, was Latin. The Latin Vulgate was currently read in churches. It is not that Rome objected in principle to versions in the native tongues, provided they were orthodox and authorized. “Orthodox” means the opposite of “heretic”. Wycliffe’s Bible was rejected as heretic and so was Tyndale’s. “Authorized” means under control and authority of the Roman Church, which will decide which translations are allowed to be published and who are entitled to use them, normally the clergy, who will

¹ Bainton, R. H. (1965):*The Reformation in the Sixteenth Century*. Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1965: 191.

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explain the contents to the public using their own words. In the circumstances, a translation taken directly from the Hebrew and the Greek was bound to offend the Church of Rome, which would have termed it as unauthorized, because certain renderings of the Latin version commonly adduced in support of crucial doctrines had been expunged.¹

The whole thing is that the new versions of the Bible into English were considered by the king as a weapon against Rome, not only because of the general principle that the Bible should be accessible to every man in a form that he could understand, directly, with neither interpretation nor explanation, but also because these versions were to be taken from the original Hebrew and Greek; and, above all, because the king stripped Rome of its traditional right to authorize a version, to declare it orthodox or not, and to interpret the whole Bible. On top of that, the new versions will be dedicated to the Monarch in such a way that he will take the opportunity of striking on the Pope and, consequently, reaffirm his position as Supreme Head of the Church of England.

Myles Coverdale was commissioned to produce a version of the Bible in English, which was printed in October, 1535. He availed himself of Tyndale's, which became the basis for subsequent versions. It was printed on the Continent, but it was quickly imported into England, and a dedication to Henry VIII was inserted in those imported copies. The dedication speaks in severely critical terms of the Pope, while it highly praises the king. The Pope is compared to Caiaphas, who "rent his clothes saying, He hath spoken blasphemy", when Jesus was asked to "tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God".² Yet even as Caiaphas spoke better than he knew when he prophesied that Jesus would die for the people, for the nation: "consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not; and this spake he not of himself, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation",³ so the Pope did better than he knew when he conferred the title "Defender of the Faith" on king Henry, for the king has proved himself a worthier Defender of the Faith than the Pope envisaged.

¹ Bainton, R. H., *op. cit.*, p. 195.

² Mt. 26, 63-66.

³ Jn. 11, 49-52.

Then, towards the end, the dedication makes some very illustrative antithetic comparisons, in which the Pope is associated with the Pharaoh, the Church with the people of Israel in slavery, and the king with “our Moses who brought us out of this old Egypt from the cruel hands of our spiritual Pharaoh”; much in the same way, the Pope is Goliath and “Your Grace is King David delivering us out of our old Babylonical captivity”. The dedication proceeds considering “Your Imperial Majesty” my natural “liege Lord”, an expression from the feudal times, which means absolute power: sovereign ruler, landowner, entitled to receive, service, homage ... and, at the same time, “Head of the Church of England”, and also “the true defender and maintainer of God’s laws”. Consequently, it is up to the king “to correct it, to amend it, to improve it, to reject it”.¹

To our present-day taste the flattering language of the dedication to the king may appear over-fulsome; but it, no doubt helped towards the desirable issue of widening and consolidating the breach with Rome. Nevertheless, the king’s approval of the version was given only by word of mouth, and no formal royal permission was recorded. Probably, it was due to Coverdale’s indebtedness to Tyndale, and, it was believed, to Luther; this being the reason why Tyndale himself had been condemned. King Henry, so energetic an opponent of Lutheranism, was tolerant with it because Anne Boleyn manifested a keen interest in Coverdale’s version; but with her fall and death in 1536, this edition of the Bible ceased to play any part in English life.

In 1537 there appeared the so called Matthew’s Bible, which bears the words at the bottom of its title page: “set forth with the kinges most gracyous lycence”. On examination, it is seen to be substantially Tyndale’s translation, as far as Tyndale had reached.² It was an act of justice that the first English Bible to be published under royal licence should be Tyndale’s Bible, even if it was not yet advisable to associate Tyndale’s name with it publicly; and we say of the “royal licence” and act of justice, because their breach with Rome had already been consummated and Pope’s authority rejected.

¹ Bruce, F. F. (1979): *History of the Bible in English*. Lutter-worth, London, 1979: 56, 57.

² Cf. Olivera, M. (1991) “The birth of the Bible in English”, *Actas del I Congreso de SEDERI*, Zaragoza: Universidad de Zaragoza.

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It was decided that a revision of Matthew's Bible should be undertaken to render it more generally acceptable, as the most conservative bishops and clergy could still notice some signs of outspoken Protestantism, mainly on its notes. The work of revision was entrusted to Coverdale, and the new book was to be known as the *Great Bible*, published in April, 1539, and which, according to the title, "was translated after the veryte of the Hebrue and Greke texts by the dylygent studye of dyverse excellent learned men; prynted by Rychard Grafton and Edward Whitchurch; cum privilegio at imprimendum solum".

This title is surrounded by a woodcut in which king Henry from his throne delivers the Word of God with his right hand to Cranmer and with his left to Cromwell, while Cranmer and Cromwell in their turn deliver it to the clergy and laity respectively, representing the two main powers: the ecclesiastical power by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the secular power by the Lord Chancellor; and the king is above both of them as their source; he is in the place of God, or rather the Son of God, as the picture also shows a crowd of men, women and children crying: "God save the King" (a prayer that has become familiar among the British), while the Almighty Father looks down approvingly on the whole scene and says: "my word that goeth forth out of my mouth shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please";¹ and also, "I have found a man after my own heart, who shall perform all my desire".² Let's remark that the "man" in the picture is, obviously, king Henry VIII, but the "man" in the Book of Acts, where the quotation comes from, is king David, chosen by God to lead the people of Israel.

The woodcut around the title continued to be reproduced in the following editions of the Great Bible, but when Thomas Cromwell fell from favour in 1540 his arms were cut off, as a clear sign of him not being worthy to receive and handle the Word of God. And the title was rewritten so as to introduce the formula of the whole power: "our moost redoubted Prynce and soveraygne Lorde Kynge Henry the VIII, supreme heade of this churche and realme of Englande".³

¹ Is. 55, 11.

² Act. 13, 22.

³ Bruce, F. F., op. cit., p. 71.

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Schism without heresy. So things stood at the end of his reign. Henry died in 1547, and was succeeded by the only son born to him by any of his six wives, Edward VI. Henry's program of schism without heresy provoked division: some went to the block for refusal to take the oath to the king as the Supreme Head of the Church, among them were Cardinal Fisher and Sir Thomas More; but many others who took the oath were no doubt honest. And this raises the crucial question: whether conscience can be relative and yet binding; or, in other words, whether it is possible for men to take opposite courses of action and yet be equally sincere.

Thomas More took his stand squarely for the absolute obligation of a relative conscience, and so he said: "The high judge might exalt others to heaven who swore in good conscience, and yet for the same consign him to the devil because he did not think as they thought".¹ The two concepts "absolute" and "relative" seem contradictory in the same clause; but we understand "relative" in the sense that you should respect what the others honestly think is right, and "absolute" in the sense that you should follow what you honestly think is right.

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¹ Bainton, R. H., *op. cit.*, p. 198.

